Black Boxes on Board

DALLAS, May 10 - When a plane crashes, investigators head straight to the black box for an accurate record of the plane's systems.

When a car wrecks, police rely instead on witnesses and external evidence.

Most police and even drivers don't know that millions of cars *do* have black boxes -- and have had them for years.

When you buckle your seat belt or hit the brake, odds are someone is taking notes on your driving.

That "someone" is a computer hidden right under your front seat.

According to accident reconstruction expert Bob Swint, "It's a small computer with a memory that stores the data and will not lose that data in the accident or in loss of power."

Swint is one of the few people in the nation outside the major carmakers who has the expertise and the equipment to download information from car black boxes.

"It tells you the speed. It tells if the air bag operated properly. It tells you if seat belts were used," Swint explained.

Swint's laboratory isn't like most. It's full of wrecked cars. These black boxes provide key evidence in many of his investigations. Carmakers say their engineers need the data from black boxes to make cars safer.

Last November, Jessica Court skidded on wet pavement while driving on Interstate 30 and hit a guard rail.

The air bag in her Chevrolet Trakker left a deep imprint on her face -- and she is now blind in her right eye.

"My face felt like it was on fire, like it was burning," Court said, "and I touched here and felt this eye was completely swollen shut."

Court wants the black box data from her vehicle to learn if the air bag worked properly.

"I hope that it shows that whatever I did was right," said Court, "and the airbag was wrong."

Court's attorney, Lee Brown, has already settled another case where an air bag caused severe injury. He says the black box data helped prove it.

"That may be a motivation why the manufacturers are not telling consumers about the wealth of information that is contained in the black box," Brown said.

But the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety -- funded by carmakers -- says General Motors has disclosed black boxes in its owner manuals for about 7 years.

We checked -- it's an obscure paragraph easily missed in the Air Bag section of the manual.

Phil Haseltine, president of the coalition says, "They're not advertised because it's information that's seldom used."

No one denies how valuable the information can be.

"Event data recorder information is good for both sides for the consumer and manufacturer," Haseltine said, "because it does help establish what actually happened during the crash in question."

The recorder in the newest GM cars runs continuously.

When an air bag goes off, the recorder stops saving vital information in the critical final 5 seconds.

Air bags are changing, thanks to lessons learned from these black boxes.

Haseltine adds, "Some consumers were complaining that their air bags were going off at very low-speed collisions."

So General Motors and the government investigated. The black boxes in those cars proved there *was* an air bag defect. GM then voluntarily recalled more than half a million Sunfires and Cavaliers.

Most consumers still don't know they're sitting on sophisticated crash data recorders.

As Bob Swint noted, "The individual needs to know about it, because if there is some fault in the air bag system, he needs to know that because he possibly is subjected to an injury that shouldn't have occurred if the air bag didn't deploy properly."

It takes a wreck for the black box to gather meaningful data, but that information can pay off in safer designs later.

GM is farther ahead in this technology than the other major car companies, but Ford has now announced a smart air bag system on Taurus and Mercury Sable models which also has a crash data recorder.

However, if everyone who had accidents starting today started asking for the black box data, car makers couldn't handle the demand.

Car dealers cannot access the black boxes; only a select few experts can do it. The backlog that would ensue would slow insurance claims and likely delay repairs.

By: Vince Paton